

The International Curriculum: Current Trends and Emerging Needs

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Abstract

This paper examines the current state of tertiary level international curricula and provides groundwork for future research aimed at ongoing needs. Recognized is the premise that existing international curricular programs require maintenance. Burn (1995) called for curriculum reform in international departments two decades ago with the rationale that effective programming will consider both the near and distant future contexts of the business world. Devine (1993) provided some evidence of progress in the same era, but it is uncertain whether or not this was a sustained or isolated event. Additionally, there tends to be a mix in thought about what exactly constitutes an international curriculum: should it focus on students (Ledwith & Seymour, 2001; Mahon, 2007; Martin, 2009) or also involve faculty (Hung, 2000; Bryant, Karney, & Vigier, 2010; Colbert, 2010)? Should it be confined to the classroom or also include extracurricular and foreign exchange programs (Eagan and Benedick, 2008)? What components are characteristic of a functional international curriculum (Devine, 1993)? Lastly, is it possible to achieve an international curriculum model that fits all schools, or is it more appropriate to craft tailored programs according to the particular institution and student/faculty populations (Devine, 1993; Hung, 2000)? This paper explores these issues in the context of relevant literature and recommends directions for future research.

Keywords

International curriculum; educational evolution; education reform; futuring education; foreign exchange; culturally responsive education.

Introduction

Internationalization is an undeniable characteristic of contemporary society. It has permeated every corner of every aspect of every culture around the world. Very few niche or small-scale organizations exist in strictly local environments. By contrast, one would be hard-pressed to name a large organization that has not crossed at least several borders in some or all of its operations. Education is no exception. Although the theoretical concept of education may take the form of a textbook or an isolated pupil-teacher duo, the physical and logistical infrastructures have transcended boundaries long ago. This is nothing new. But what is new are the unexpected turns and twists that this trend takes as we progress onward through time: at what point was it necessary for Chinese students to start learning English? At what point did Spanish become the unofficial second language of the United States? What influences have global phenomena such as conflict, trade and commerce had on the developing trends of education? What are the subtle differences in what should be learnt by today's business student as opposed to a business

student two decades ago? No matter what sector we examine, the education of professionals within that sector has necessarily taken an international flavor. Accordingly, as unexpected times of conflict, evolving trends in trade, and progressing levels of commerce emerge, education will be forced to accommodate the changes at the school level. The question we are obligated to address is: how can we appropriately prepare emerging professionals at the academic level for real-world diversity and international issues? We see from the literature that although international curriculums are commonplace in universities, they are often criticized for being limited in scope, obsolete, or downright misleading. This paper seeks to provide an overview of the current state of the literature and calls for ongoing action research in order to investigate better ways of designing and implementing proper international curricula.

Nino (2010) provides a review of the literature on business education in general. The author digs deep into the history of the practice and reminds us that original business curricula were not rooted in academic theory or research, but rather in marketplace behavior. Nino also reviews the fact that business education became more established in theory as soon as business management became a formal profession; it is this key shift where we began to see theory develop. And, of course, with the onset and progress of globalization, this theory moved beyond the domestic realm and into the international marketplace. It is important to keep this in mind: the balance in forcing mechanisms between real-world economic shifts and what may be traditionally perceived as sound business theory.

Previous Calls for Reform

Burn and Smuckler (1995) raised important questions more than 15 years ago: "How are international [tertiary] programs funded and managed? What faculty and other specialized resources are needed for effective internationalization? What programs and experiences have the most profound effect on the undergraduate attitudes and perceptions about cultural, economic and political forces in the complex world they will inherit? What has and what could be the impact of the university to understand and find the route to augment and broaden the impact in line with state and local needs and within the broader mission of most U.S. institutions of higher education?" (p. 5). Though these questions may have been answered years ago in that context, the same questions remain relevant when examining the current state of international curriculums and their infrastructures. The same authors carefully explain that their research is intended to inspire future efforts with long-term time scales (in the order of 5-10+ years) with the vision that internationalization should not pretend to solve short-term needs; rather, a longer-term approach is necessary due to the constantly evolving and quite large scale of internationalization (p. 25). Perhaps most significantly in this paper, four specific types of research are proposed for future efforts: data banks (whereby regular statistics would be gathered and made available to professionals); specific surveys (whereby individuals and institutions would shed light on the current state of affairs); impact studies and evaluations (whereby specific activities or programs would be analyzed and results correlated); and social science-based exploration (whereby behavioral science would track the resulting attitudes of students involved in international programs) (p. 26-27).

Even earlier, Devine (1993) provided strong evidence that legitimate change was being undergone. The author carefully details how two schools, the University of Michigan and the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, have taken measures to increase internationalization in three specific areas: interdisciplinary approaches, international business, and foreign languages. This inspires a great deal of hope that issues have not only been targeted, but that measures have been in order to affect change. We may ask, however, have these changes been sustained? Are they isolated cases? Are not the same questions that inspired the changes still

relevant today?

For the first time, Schoorman (2000) introduced an institution-wide framework whereby schools may move towards internationalization. Three specific characteristics were proposed: institutional commitment; organizational leadership; and resource availability. According to the author, any school successfully moving towards internationalization will display these three characteristics. The author goes on to describe micro and macro examples of how internationalization is actually implemented. Micro examples include changes in university services (e.g. student services, information technology and management, etc.); curriculum development (individual course development, language courses, infusion, area studies, cross-cultural and international courses, and global studies); and social events (cultural activities, cross-cultural discussions, residence hall activities and student involvement). Macro examples include recruitment of international students; increasing study abroad educational opportunities for both students and faculty; having student and faculty exchange programs; and encouraging international collaborative research programs. In this sense we see a very broad protocol for the internationalization of the institution itself, a major component of this being curricular changes. It is also evident here in this work that the term curriculum most likely reaches beyond pedagogical practices and into the realms of extracurricular activities including cultural activities and exchange programs. Thus, we are obligated to differentiate between the two meanings: shall we confine the curricula to the classroom or include supplementary activities? The author raises another important point which is echoed by Eagan and Benedick (2008): should a truly international curriculum focus on only students or also faculty? Both papers argue that faculty should be involved (i.e. trained, educated and given experience) with multicultural issues.

Internationalization for Faculty

Hung (2000) provides an interesting case study whereby professionals from two schools, Hong Kong Polytechnic and the University of Warwick, enrolled in an exchange program. The author describes how students' learnings were two-fold: they learned how to perform technical skills from the point of view of the other culture; and they gained significant exposure to the host culture. In the end, the author concludes that the program was successful and that such a model is a proven approach (p. 8). However, two key observations to consider are the following: this was a targeted program tailored specifically to the two participating organizations, and the student body consisted of adult working professionals rather than undergraduate students.

Colbert (2010) is a strong proponent of faculty development in diversity issues for the purpose of strengthening the international program. This idea of culturally responsive teaching is purported as a primary mechanism for leading any sort of study that may immediately or eventually take the form of an international curriculum and was evidenced in the series of workshops outlined in the paper. It should be logical at this point that in order to effectively operate the international curriculum, some measure of culture ought to be present. The author eventually makes tangible recommendations to the educator about how to handle diversity issues within the classroom.

Internationalization for Students

Mahon (2007) describes teaching abroad programs as catalysts for the development of the emerging teacher. A slight bridge is crossed here as this author discusses exchange programs from the perspective of both the student and the teacher: the idea that aspiring teachers, as undergraduate students, will best benefit from completing part of

their coursework overseas.

Other works describe study abroad programs strictly for the benefit of undergraduate business students. Bryant, Karney and Vigier (2010) provide a case study in which students participate in a program between a US university and a French business institute. Three main items were analyzed: differences in curricular content, culture, and language. The results of this paper were particularly distinct: as the study was focused on student exchange, one outcome was the realization that faculty were a key component left unconsidered. In an effort to rectify this, successive efforts involved faculty; the result was a healthy exchange of ideas and language at the faculty level. This was marked as an institutional initiative. Another outcome was that of social networking, again at the institutional level, between the two schools and cultures: numerous partnerships have been developed, students regularly study abroad as part of their curriculum, and business courses in France are now taught completely in English. Lastly, the authors mention an overall increase in awareness amongst the professional community citing higher rankings and accreditations.

Internationalization of the Institution

Eagan and Benedick (2008) note that most tertiary level international curriculums are housed within the International Business (IB) departments and, accordingly, generally take the form of an IB course or program. They argue for the elimination of these departmental lines and propose a more general curriculum whereby students are exposed to cultural studies as opposed to domestic and international cultures (p. 1). Reaching further back, we see Blankenship, et al. (2010) arguing that there is not enough focus on diversity issues within international business curricula. Colbert (2010) is also a proponent of adding more diversity to curricula, except from an infrastructural standpoint: that curricula should be guided by faculty who are well-versed in diversity issues.

Utsumi (2005) offers an interesting mechanism targeting global education and, ultimately, global peace: the use of advanced telecommunications including the Internet. This report builds a case around the use of technology—at the institutional level—whereby students may access other cultural and geographic areas virtually and that this cost-effective educational methodology may ultimately pave the way to what we might conceptualize as an international curriculum. The author states, “If global peace is ever to be achieved, global-scale education, with the use of the modern digital telecommunications, will be needed to create mutual understanding among nations, cultures, ethnic groups, and religions. The Internet is the future of telecommunications and can be a medium for building peace” (p. 1). The author also provides detailed logistical plans for implementing the Global University System (GUS) which is a relatively simply-presented network that would hold the burden of a global telecommunications system. Although a bit futuristic, perhaps there is merit to this idea.

Other Considerations

Although Ehiobuche, Madueke and Ogechukwu (2010) mention all three realms (the learner, teacher, and institution), it tends to focus on what it means to obtain a business education through entrepreneurship, both formally (i.e. in a school) and informally (i.e. through practical experience). The authors emphasize the importance of the entrepreneurial spirit to the American economy (p. 1) and discuss—from an American perspective—how entrepreneurialism can be an effective means to the end product which is a full business education. In this sense, the curriculum is transferred from the institution to the learner in an independent format. Keeping in mind we are

discussing formal curriculum, should it then become a consideration to require university students to undergo an adventure in entrepreneurship?

Conclusions

The intent of this paper is to examine trends in the nature of international curricula. Likely by default, it appears that, international curricula tend to fall under the umbrella of the IB department for any given university. Though there is opposition to this particular fit (Eagan & Benedick, 2008), it tends to represent the general consensus. We see also that there is much discussion about how we should view the international curriculum: whether it be from the point of the view of the student, the teacher, the institution or a combination of all of these. Several reports (Bryant, Karney, & Vigier, 2010; Colbert, 2010; Mahon, 2007; Ehiobuche, Madueke & Ogechukwu, 2010) tend to support a blended model. There are also discrepancies between definition (i.e. Is a curriculum isolated or does it include extracurricular activities?), responsibility (i.e. Is it the teacher's job or the institution's job to ensure proper curricular implementation?), and fit (i.e. Can we establish a model that works for all schools, or ought we adhere to customized programs?). In this regard there is a need for future research to answer these questions. It is suggested that focus be placed on one particular question: what are the characteristics or components of a functional and truly international curriculum? Although Devine (1993) advanced discussion of this question several years ago, it remains relevant today and, as Burn and Smuckler (1995) mention, there will be a need to constantly revisit these ideas with longer versus shorter-term visions of the current state of international business and its implications for the international student.

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